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The Value and Limitations of Minimalist Stabilization Efforts

The prolonged military and political interventions undertaken by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan have elicited much criticism. Some critics claim that these wars demonstrate the futility of military interventions generally. Others accept that interventions will sometimes be necessary, but argue that large “nation-building” missions are neither affordable nor effective, advocating instead for small-scale operations designed to tip the balance in favor of local U.S. allies.

To help the United States determine the proper scale of interventions, researchers at RAND Arroyo Center examined both the value and the limitations of such “minimalist stabilization” efforts. They assessed all civil wars or insurgencies of the past 40 years, comparing those that entailed large-scale nation building missions, minimalist stabilization operations, or no foreign intervention. The research team augmented this quantitative assessment with in-depth case studies.

Defining “Minimalist Stabilization”

The goal of a large-scale nation-building mission is to enforce peace and rebuild the political institutions and economy of a weak or failed state. Minimalist stabilization efforts are less ambitious, offering small-scale and less costly support to governments under threat. Operations are usually conducted through the existing local power structures, and they typically emphasize rapid development of and transfer of responsibility to the host nation’s own security forces. There will be many criteria on which to judge “success” in such an effort, but this study focuses on one key dimension: did the mission help the supported government achieve military victory in its counterinsurgency campaign?

Minimalist Stabilization Efforts Typically Do Not Improve the Odds of Victory

Since 1970, there have been 22 minimalist stabilization missions on behalf of a government

Key Points

- Minimalist stabilization missions typically do not improve the partner government’s chances of victory; however, they do dramatically reduce the odds of defeat.
- Most commonly, minimalist stabilization missions result either in military stalemate or significant compromise with the insurgents, and such outcomes are usually fragile unless stabilized by an ongoing international military presence.
- While large-scale military interventions are too few to make broad generalizations, they appear to offer better odds of both avoiding defeat and potentially securing victory—although the odds are still sufficiently daunting that they should be seen as a last resort.

fighting an insurgency. In only three cases in the past four decades (Republic of Congo, 1997–98; Oman, 1971–75; Zaire, 1977–78) did minimalist efforts clearly tilt the balance toward military victory by the supported government. Overall, an examination of the outcomes of all minimalist stabilization missions suggests that these efforts do not significantly improve the supported government’s chances of winning a civil war.

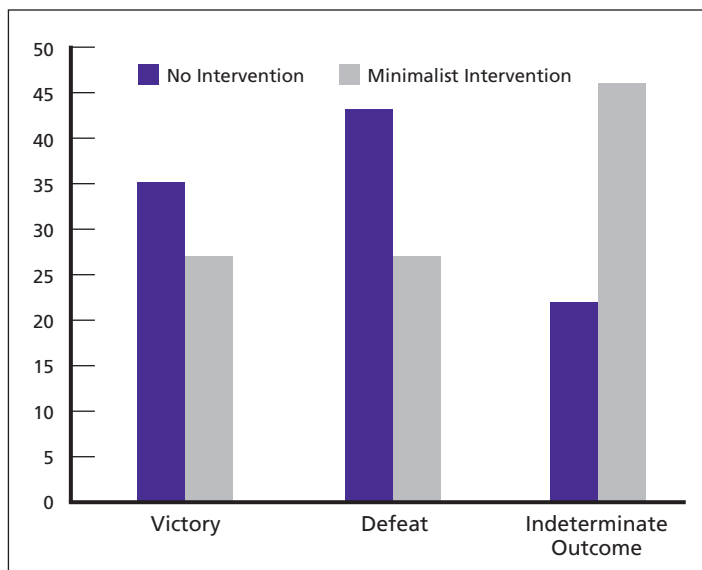
But Minimalist Stabilization Efforts Can Lessen the Odds of Defeat

The figure illustrates the extent to which minimalist stabilization efforts have benefited supported governments.

When minimalist stabilization is employed, the likelihood of a supported government’s defeat falls dramatically. This improvement is not, however, mirrored by a corresponding increase in the probability of victory. Instead, the most probable result of minimalist stabilization is a mixed outcome—that is, either military stalemate or a

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Outcomes in Minimalist Interventions and No Interventions



negotiated settlement that concedes considerable political and security rights to the insurgents. These results suggest that minimalist stabilization often contributes to significant operational successes—the degrading of insurgent capabilities—but seldom to decisive outcomes.

Knowing the Limits of Minimalist Stabilization Efforts Can Improve Outcomes

The study finds that minimalist stabilization efforts usually do not alter the underlying structure of the conflict. They also typically do not help foster political reforms in the supported government, nor do they cut insurgents off from their resource bases. Minimalist stabilization missions may in fact make the situation worse. They may provide just enough resources to alleviate any pressure on the supported government to reform itself,

and at the same time offer too little to enable or compel the state to undertake significant reforms. These dynamics suggest that the operational gains attributable to minimalist stabilization can be converted into decisive success only if the underlying political or international structure of the conflict can be altered.

Understanding the limits of what these efforts can achieve can improve the effectiveness of an intervention. First, minimalist stabilization appears most likely to yield victory when both the government and the insurgents are weak. Second, minimalist forces are usually adequate to conduct consensual peacekeeping missions. The odds of success might also be improved by combining minimalist operations with non-military instruments; where feasible, the intervening power should work with key countries to deny the armed opposition the resources required for insurgency.

Policy Implications

Future U.S. minimalist stabilization efforts should reflect an understanding of both the possibilities and the limitations of minimalist stabilization. Most minimalist interventions lead to stalemate or negotiated settlements—outcomes that are historically precarious and frequently lead to renewed fighting. This suggests that the need for stabilization missions does not end with the end of conflict but endures well into the post-conflict period. Lengthy missions can place significant stress on U.S. armed forces, and the United States should seek to enlist other partners in such missions.

Minimalist stabilization operations yield a reasonable chance of modest success for a modest cost. In some circumstances they are perfectly appropriate and indeed should be the preferred tool to realize U.S. foreign policy goals. But they are not always appropriate. The evidence in this study suggests that in the worst environments, only large-scale interventions can provide a sizable improvement in the odds of securing an acceptable outcome. ■

This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *The Uses and Limits of Small-Scale Military Interventions*, by Stephen Watts, Caroline Baxter, Molly Dunigan, and Christopher Rizzi, MG-1226-RC, 2012 (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1226.html>). This research brief was written by Kate Giglio. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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